DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 343 413 FL 020 140

AUTHOR Nunan, David
TITLE Principles of Communicative Task Design.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 16p.; In: Materials for Language Learning and Teaching. Anthology Series 22; see FL 020 138.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *Communicative Competence (Languages); Foreign Countries; *Instructional Materials; *Material Development; Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning

ABSTRACT

The use of the learning task as a basic planning and instructional tool for communicative second language instruction is discussed, and considerations and procedures for designing such tasks are outlined. A task is defined as a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused principally on meaning rather than form. A communicative task drawn from commercial textbooks is used to illustrate component parts. The role of tasks in communicative language teaching is examined, and the steps in an integrated approach to curriculum development are outlined. Two rationales for classroom tasks, real-world and pedagogic, are differentiated and their differential focuses are noted. Finally, a list of questions is offered as a guide to evaluating communicative second language tasks in terms of their goals; the linguistic or other input data on which they are based; the activities derived from the input; the roles and settings implied by different tasks for teachers and learners; considerations for implementation, grading, and integration into the curriculum; and assessment of learner performance. A brief list of references is appended. (MSE)

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Principles of Communicative Task Design

David Nunan

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PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATIVE TASK DESIGN[1]

David Nunan

1 INTRODUCTION

Although the idea of using the learning 'task' as a basic planning tool is not a new one in the general educational field, it is a relatively recent arrival on the language teaching scene, and there remains some confusion about the place of tasks within the curriculum. In particular, there is debate as to whether 'task' is a concept which properly belongs to syllabus design or methodology. In this paper, I shall argue that the separation of syllabus design and methodology becomes increasingly problematical with the development of communicative language teaching.

Looked at in traditional terms, (ie seeing syllabus design as being primarily concerned with the specification of what learners will learn, and methodology as being mainly concerned with specifying how learners will learn) the design of learning tasks is part of methodology. However, if we see curriculum planning as an integrated set of processes involving, among other things, the specification of both what and how, then the argument over whether the design and development of tasks belongs to syllabus design or to methodology becomes unimportant.

For much of this century, language teaching has been preoccupied with methods. In some extreme cases this has led to a search for the 'right method'. Methods tend to exist as package deals, each with its own set of principles and operating procedures, each with its own set of preferred learning tasks. I do not accept that there is such a thing as the 'right method', and I do not intent to assign different tasks to different methodological pigeon-holes. Rather, I shall look at tasks in terms of their goals, the input data, linguistic or otherwise, on which they are based, the activities derived from the input, and the roles and settings implied by different tasks for teachers and learners.

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[1] This paper is based on material to be published in Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2 'TASK' DEFINED

In turning to the concept of 'task', the first thing we need to do is decide just what we mean the by term itself. A review of the literature reveals a range of definitions. I shall look at three of these, the first of which is from Long.

> [A task is] a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patent, sorting letters, taking a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by "task" is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between.
>
> (Long, 1985: 89)

We can see that Long offers a non-linguistic definition. It is, in fact, the sort of characterisation which might be offered by a learner, if asked why he/she is learning the language.

Richards, Platt and Weber (1986) offer the following definition:

> an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (ie as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command, may be referred to as tasks. Tasks may or may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task. The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative ... since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake.
>
> (Richards; Platt and Weber, 1985: 289)

Here, in contrast with Long, the authors offer a pedagogical definition. In other words, tasks are defined in terms of classroom undertakings.

The final definition is from Breen:

> ... any structured language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of out comes for those who undertake the task. 'Task' is therefore assumed to refer to a range of workplans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning - from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and

lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision making.

(Breen, 1987: 23)

All of these definitions have a common characteristic. They all suggest that tasks are concerned with communicative language use. In other words, they refer to undertakings in which the learners comprehend, produce and interact in the target language in contexts in which they are focussed on meaning rather than form.

In this paper, I shall define the communicative task as a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right.

As I have already suggested, minimally, a task will consist of some input and one or more related activities. Input refers to the data that learners are to work on. It may be linguistic or non-linguistic, while 'activity' refers to the work that the learner will do on the task. In addition, tasks will have, either explicitly or implicitly (and in most cases these are implicit) goals, roles of teachers and learners and a setting. These components are set out in Figure 1.

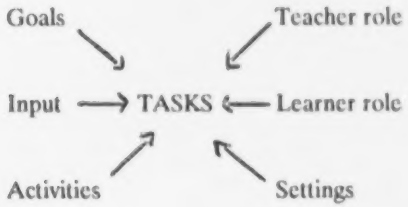

Figure 1: A framework for analysing communicative tasks

In order to exemplify these components in action, I should like to look at a communicative task from a commercially published coursebook. The example I have selected is taken from Maley and Moulding (1986).

Pre-listening

1 a) Look carefully at this questionnaire.

What are your sleeping habits?

A short questionnaire
to discover your
sleeping habits

1 How much time do you spend on bedmaking?
a) 5 mins a day
b) 5 mins every other day
c) 5 mins a week

2 Before you go to bed do you
a) pull open the downstairs curtains
b) read
c) eat

3 After a night's sleep do you find that the covers
a) are as tidy as when you went to bed
b) are all over the floor
c) are in a heap in the middle of the bed

4 If you have trouble getting to sleep do you
a) count sheep
b) toss and turn
c) lie still and concentrate

5 If you wake up in the middle of the night is it because
a) you remember something you ought to have done
b) you're cold
c) you're hungry

6 If you hear a bump in the night do you
a) get up cautiously and investigate quietly
b) charge around the house with a weapon
c) turn over and go back to sleep

7 Do other people complain about your sleeping habits?
a) never
b) frequently
c) sometimes

8 When you have dreams are they mostly
a) dreams about work
b) nightmares
c) sweet dreams

Make sure that you understand all the words in it and that you know how they are pronounced.

b) Now, working in pairs, one of you should interview the other using this questionnaire. If there is time, change roles (that is, the interviewer should now be interviewed).

(Maley and Moulding 1981 : 3)

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The various components of the task are set out in Table 1.

Table 1

Examples of communicative task components

COMPONENT	EXAMPLE
GOAL	Exchanging personal information
INPUT	Questionnaire on sleeping habits
ACTIVITY	(i) Reading questionnaire (ii) Asking and answering questions about sleeping habits
TEACHER ROLE	Monitor and facilitator
LEARNER ROLE	Conversational partner
SETTING	Classroom/pair work

3 TASKS AND COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

The ascent of the 'task' as a basic planning tool in language curriculum design has come about as a result of changing attitudes towards language and language learning. These changes have manifested themselves in the cluster of approaches to language learning and teaching known as communicative language teaching or CLT. Central to CLT is the belief that learning a language involves more than simply learning grammatical patterns and rules. One also needs to be able to put one's knowledge to communicative effect.

With the development of CLT, the distinction between syllabus design and methodology (ie between specifying the 'what' and the 'how' of the curriculum) has become blurred. There is now a much closer relationship between the end of the curriculum (the capacity to communicate with others in the target language) and the means (classroom tasks, activities and exercises to develop this capacity). It is now beginning to be accepted that the syllabus designer needs to take both the ends and the means into consideration.

An influential figure in this move to give greater prominence to communicative means, rather than to linguistic ends is Breen. He has suggested that, rather than focusing on the end point in the learning process, there should be an attempt to:

> ... prioritize the route itself; a focusing upon the means towards the learning of a new language. Here the designer would give priority to the changing process of learning and the potential of the classroom - to the psychological and social resources applied to a new language by learners in the classroom context.
> ... a greater concern with capacity for communication rather than repertoire of communication, with the activity of learning a language viewed as important as the language itself, and with a focus upon means rather than predetermined objectives, all indicate priority of process over content.
>
> (Breen, 1984: 52-53)

4 CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING TASKS

'Curriculum' is a large and complex concept which has been variously defined by different players in the educational drama. In some (principally American) contexts, it is used synonomously with 'syllabus', and is often intended to refer to a course of study. Thus, we have the 'physics curriculum' and the 'history curriculum'. In the present context, I shall use 'syllabus' to refer to the selecting and grading of content, and 'curriculum' more widely to refer to all aspects of planning, implementing, evaluating and managing an educational programme (Nunan, 1988b). Such a characterisation is in harmony with Richards, Platt and Weber, who define 'curriculum as an educational programme which sets out:

> (a) the educational purpose of the programme (the ends)
> (b) the content, teaching procedures and learning experiences which will be necessary to achieve this purpose (the means)
> (c) some means for assessing whether or not the educational ends have been achieved.
>
> (Richards; Platt and Weber, 1986: 70)

In general education, systematic curriculum development emerged in the forties. One of the most influential figures of the day was Tyler who set out a curriculum model orchestrated around four key elements as set out in Figure 2.

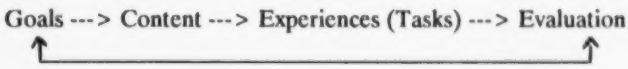

Figure 2: A linear model of curriculum development

This model was referred to as the linear or 'ballistic' model as it began with a specification of goals and objectives, moved on to specify content, thence to learning experiences and finally to evaluation. The outcomes of evaluation were then fed back into the goal specification phase.

In a communicative curriculum, in which means and ends are bound more tightly together, we might have a model such as the one set out in Figure 3, in which content and learning experiences (including communicative tasks) are developed in tandem, and in which tasks can suggest content and vice versa.

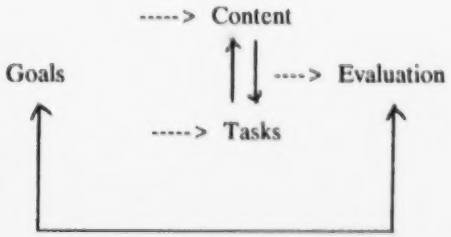

Figure 3: An integrated approach to curriculum development

Such an approach might be operationalised as follows:

Table 2

Steps in an integrated approach to curriculum development

STEP	PROCEDURE	EXAMPLE
1	Identify target group	L2 learners who want to study at university
2	Establish goals	Read academic texts Take part in tutorial discussions Take lecture notes Write formal essay
3	Select input data	Academic texts
4	Consult syllabus checklist	Grammar Vocabulary
5	Select activity	Transform input data by completing a table
6	Assess leaners and evaluate programme	

Thus far, I have typified the curriuclum process from the perspective of the curriculum specialist. There is some evidence that those more closely connected to the day-to-day work of the classroom such as teachers and also possibly materials writers are more likely to focus more closely on tasks, and take these as their point of departure when planning their programmes and developing materials. This has been shown to be the case for language teachers (Nunan, 1987) as well as for content teachers (Shavelson and Stern, 1981).

This alternative approach is represented in Figure 4.

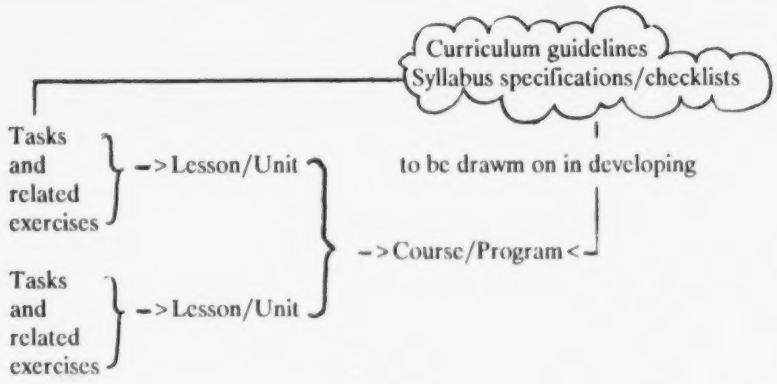

Figure 4: Curriculum planning for the classroom teacher

What I am suggesting here is that, from the perspective of the communicative classroom teacher, and also possibly for the materials developer, planning will proceed from a series of tasks along with attendant exercises such as grammar practice drills and so on. Curriculum documents and syllabus guidelines will act as a resource to be drawn on as necessary rather than a rigid set of specifications to be worked through in a linear fashion.

5 TASK RATIONALE

Classroom tasks are generally justified or rationalised in either 'real-world' or 'pedagogical' terms. Tasks with a real-world rationale require learners to approximate, in class, in the sorts of behaviours required of them in the real-world. Tasks with a pedagogic rationale, on the other hand, require learners to do things in class which they would never be called upon to perform in the world outside the classroom. As they cannot be justified on the grounds that they are enabling learners to rehearse real-world behaviours, they must have an alternative rationale. This usually takes a psycholinguistic form along the lines of: "well, although the learners are engaged in which they are unlikely to perform outside the classroom, the tasks are stimulating internal processes of acquisition.

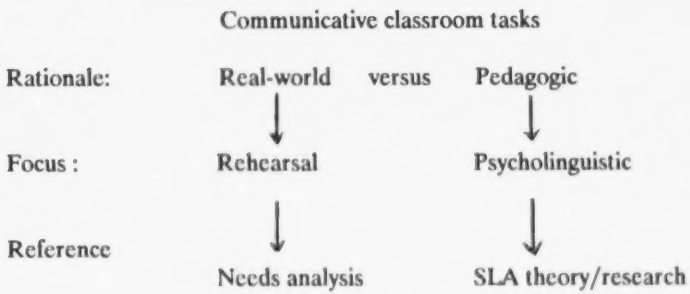

Figure 5: The real-world/pedagogic distinction

An example of a communicative tasks with a real-world rationale might be:

The learner will listen to a weather forecast and decide whether or not to take an umbrella/sweater to work.

A task with a pedagogic rationale might be:

The learner will listen to an aural text describing a family and complete a family tree.

In actual fact, the real-world/pedagogic distinction represents a continuum rather than discrete categories. In other words, tasks will or will not be more or less likely to be occur in the real world.

Recently, a number of classroom researchers have conducted some interesting investigations into the effects of pedagogic tasks on language. In an early study, Long et al. (1976) found that small group work prompted students to use a greater range of language functions than whole-class activities. Doughty and Pica (1986) found that there was more negotiation of meaning in activities in which the exchange of information was essential (rather than optional) for the successful completion of the activity, Duff (1986) discovered that problem-solving tasks prompted more interactive language than debating tasks. Varonis and Gass (1983) found that there was more modified interaction in small groups in which the learners were from different language backgrounds and proficiency levels.

6 EVALUATING TASKS

In this section I set out a list of questions which can act as a guide in the evaluation of tasks.

The list of questions can be used in a variety of ways. You will not necessarily need or want to answer all questions in task evaluation. I would suggest that at particular times (when, for example, you are trying out a new task for the first time, or using a tasks which is familiar to you but not to your students) that you record the lesson in which the task is introduced on audio or videotape and use this to aid your reflection as you evaluate the task. An alternative would be to invite a colleague to observe your class and complete the evaluation for you.

Table 2

A checklist for evaluating communicative tasks

COMPONENT	QUESTIONS
Goals and rationale	- To what extent is the goal or goals of the task obvious (a) to you (b) your students? - Is the task appropriate to the learners' proficiency level? - To what extent does the task reflect a real-world or pedagogic rationale? Is this appropriate? - Does the task encourage learners to apply classroom learning to the real world? - What beliefs about the nature of language and learning are inherent in the task? - Is the task likely to be interesting and motivating to the students?
Input	- What form does the input take? - Is it authentic? - If not, are they appropriate to the goal of the task?
Activities	- Are the activities appropriate to the communicative goals of the task? - If not, can they be modified to make them more appropriate?

	- Is the task designed to stimulate students to use bottom-up or top-down processing skills? - Is there an information gap or problem which might prompt a negotiation of meaning? - Are the activities appropriate to the input data? - Are the activities designed in a way which will allow learners to communicate and cooperate in groups?
Roles and settings	- What learner and teacher roles are inherent in the task? - Are they appropriate? - What levels of complexity are there in the classroom organisation implicit in the task? - Is the setting confined to the classroom?
Implementation	- Does the task actually engage the learners' interests? - Do the activities prompt genuine communicate interaction among students? - To what extent are learners encouraged to negotiate meaning? - Does anything unexpected occur as the task is being carried out? - What type of language is actually stimulated by the task? - Is this different from what might have been predicted?
Grading and integration	- Is the task at the appropriate level of difficulty for the students? - If not, is there any way in which the task might be modified in order to make it either easier or more challenging? - Is the task so structured that it can be undertaken at different levels of difficulty? - What are the principles upon which the tasks are sequenced? - Do tasks exhibit the 'task continuity' principle? - Are a range of macroskills integrated into the sequence of tasks?

	- If not, can you think of ways in which they might be integrated? - At the level of the unit or lesson, are communicative tasks integrated with other activities and exercises designed to provide learners with mastery of the linguistic system? - If not, are there ways in which such activities might be introduced? - Do the tasks incorporate exercises in learning -how-to-learn? - If not, are there ways in which such exercises might be introduced?
Assessment and evaluation	- What means exist for the teacher to determine how successfully the learners have performed? - Does the task have built into some means whereby learners might judge how well they have performed? - Is the task realistic in terms of the resources and teacher- expertise it demands?

7 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have considered principles of communicative task design. The 'task' has been defined as a piece of classroom work which has a sense of completeness in its own right and which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on meaning rather than form.

We have looked at the genesis of 'tasks' in communicative language teaching, and have looked at the relationship of the task to other elements in the language curriculum. We have also seen that tasks will be developed and rationalised, either in real-world or pedagogic terms. Finally, we have established a set of criteria for task evaluation.

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